

Abstract

Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (ALHE) has, since its roots in the early 1980s, grown into a routine activity in higher education institutions in the United States that is led by thousands of professionals who contribute to a growing body of scholarship. Yet, there are few formal ALHE training programs, no licensure or certification for ALHE professionals, no accreditation for ALHE programs, and only a handful of dedicated journals, resulting in limited outside recognition of ALHE as a discipline. Failure to fully establish ALHE as a discipline puts ALHE in a dangerous position, leaving its progress in advancing student learning vulnerable to external forces. The purposes of this paper are to examine the progress ALHE has made in advancing as a discipline and to explore the benefits and tensions inherent in growing ALHE as a discipline. Using lessons from Library Science, the paper concludes by identifying steps that show promise for continuing the advancement of ALHE as a discipline and ensuring ALHE is ready to meet the needs of future generations of learners.



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Advancing Assessment of Learning in Higher Education as a Discipline: Benefits, Tensions, and Next Steps

Higher education institutions provide significant benefits to their students and to the communities they serve (Bloom et al., 2006). Individual benefits from higher education may include higher salaries and benefits, higher employment rates, improved health and life expectancy, and improved quality of life for the children of college graduates. Public benefits may include decreased reliance on government financial support, increased engagement in civic activities, increased tax revenues, and greater productivity (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). Despite these benefits, higher education institutions are under pressure to meet political and corporate demands, to cut costs by reducing services and programs, and to meet rapidly changing workplace and community needs with decreased public resources.

Establishing assessment of learning in higher education (ALHE) as a discipline is an important strategy to pursue to support institutions' ability to respond to these pressures. Doing so will help: 1) maintain focus on student learning and success; 2) enhance mechanisms for ongoing self-critique and growth; and 3) provide quality control for ALHE preparation programs and ALHE professionals. The overarching goal of this paper is to examine the progress ALHE has made in advancing as a discipline. First, the paper begins by defining academic disciplines, using the history and development of library science as an example. Next, the paper explores the extent to which ALHE has made progress in

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becoming a discipline, including the possible tensions in working toward this goal and the importance of establishing ALHE as a discipline. The paper concludes by outlining next steps and important considerations for advancing ALHE as a discipline.

What is a Discipline?

The influence of academic disciplines on higher education is “inescapable” (Post, 2009). The selection of courses by students, the content and design of those courses, the appointment of faculty into departments, the flow of research dollars, and institutional governance decisions are all influenced by the power of academic disciplines. Academic disciplines have a history that can be traced back to the seven ‘liberal arts’ in medieval universities, described as logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Fanghanel, 2009). Disciplines have sometimes been described as a cartel due to their role in controlling access to professional roles (Turner, 2000) or as a tribe (Becher, 1989). While the definition of members of a discipline as a “tribe” was later criticized for its colonial roots and for creating problematic discourse (Manathunga & Brew, 2012), this notion of disciplines as socially constructed by individuals with a vested interest or agenda remains an important concept as disciplines serve as an important source of identity for faculty (Donald, 1995).

While important to understanding disciplines, taking only a socially-constructed understanding of a discipline is insufficient as Young (2008) argues that epistemological dimensions of disciplines must also be considered. Scholars who have considered disciplines from both the social and epistemological dimensions have described them as “ways of knowing,” which are defined by a set of “behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses, and motivations” (Trowler, 2014, p. 24). For members of a discipline, these dimensions “reshape them in different practice clusters” with an “organizational form” and “internal hierarchies” (Trowler, 2014, p. 25). Another important aspect of disciplines is their active, non-static nature. Disciplines have boundaries and identities that are “constantly shifting” (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009), which can make them difficult to describe without limiting that description to a specific point in time. For instance, while the discipline of arithmetic, one of the first seven liberal arts, is still very significant and influential, its practice today would be nearly unrecognizable to its earliest members. Consider, for instance, that the current signs used for addition (+) and subtraction (-) did not come into much widespread use until the late 1500s and early 1600s (Cajori, 1928), not to mention how calculators, computers, and artificial intelligence in the last 50 years have dramatically changed the practice of mathematics.

In summary, disciplines include both social and epistemological dimensions that are constantly changing and moving. They have an extremely long history, have been highly influential in higher education and offer benefits such as providing a national voice to promote good practices, enhancing mechanisms for ongoing self-critique and growth, and supporting quality control. Efforts to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline would benefit from learning from existing disciplines that have gone through this process. Closely examining an exemplar will also help elucidate the characteristics of a discipline in a concrete manner. After considering several disciplines to serve as an exemplar, Library Science was selected because it is relatively new, has a well-documented history, has been successful in becoming established as a discipline, and has some presence in nearly all higher education institutions.

History of the Development of Library Science into a Discipline

The discipline of Library Science grew out of a “move to professionalize vocational activities” in libraries in the late 19th century (Richardson, 2010, p. 1). At that time, existing librarianship programs focused on providing practical knowledge in running libraries rather than on producing academic research. A report in 1923 by Charles C. Williamson motivated a philosophical separation between clerical tasks in libraries, (e.g., organizing materials) and more professional tasks, (e.g., implementing research on how to best design and run libraries). This report was greatly influential in the development of Library Science

The educational technology industry is not an enemy to be feared. But it does need to be held accountable, which requires thoughtful scholarly critique which is enhanced by a strong, independent discipline and professional organization.

as a discipline because it specifically identified the knowledge and abilities required for professional preparation and it recommended that preparation for professional librarians occur in an accredited college program specifically dedicated to this purpose.

To offer such a program required the creation of a group of scholars who not only had the knowledge and skills they sought to impart to their students but who also performed research as professionals in this area. Williamson's report led to a call from many, such as Tai (1925), for the development of graduate programs for Library Science resulting in the first 'Graduate Library School' being started at the University of Chicago in 1926 (Richardson, 2010). In addition to the development of formal preparation programs for Library Science professionals, the 1920s and the decades that followed witnessed continuing efforts to create an accreditation system for Library Science programs, to develop a research agenda for Library Science, and to establish respected research journals dedicated to Library Science. Efforts to develop accreditation for Library Science preparation programs began in the United States in 1923 with the American Library Association's appointment of a board to set standards for accrediting programs (American Library Association, 1996).

In tandem with the development of a research agenda was the establishment of credible research journals in which such research could be published. The first widely recognized Library Science journal dedicated to research was *The Library Quarterly* whose development required years of debate and the identification of sufficient resources which were finally received in the form of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation (Norman, 1988). The development of *The Library Quarterly* was viewed as a "significant advance in librarianship's progress toward professional status" (Norman, 1988, p. 327). In the very first issue of *The Library Quarterly*, Charles Williamson defined an early research agenda for Library Science by stating how he was "in some doubt as to whether libraries are doing their job much better than they did before the great war" (Williamson, 1931, p. 3). In this way, the first component of the research agenda for Library Science was of a practical nature—to ensure libraries were fulfilling their purpose as effectively as possible. Other research needs included the study of the "human material," such as the "attitudes of the staff, of the patrons, and even of the non-reading public" (Williamson, 1931, p. 15).

To summarize, a historical review of the development of Library Science as a discipline identified the following noteworthy elements: A) identification of the knowledge and abilities needed for those who wish to engage in the profession; B) creation of formal preparation programs that intend to develop this knowledge and these abilities in its students; C) a system to accredit preparation programs to ensure those entering the profession had the required knowledge and abilities; D) development of a research agenda that sought to expand knowledge in the area and to ensure highly effective practices; and E) the creation of dedicated research journals where those performing research could easily share their work with other scholars. Importantly, success in achieving progress on these five elements was driven by demand for professionals who were able to solve important problems in Library Science. With this background in mind, it is now possible to consider the extent to which ALHE may be considered a discipline. The next section provides a brief history of ALHE and explores progress and current indicators of ALHE's status as a discipline.

Is ALHE a Discipline?

There is evidence that assessment of student learning has been an educational practice since at least 589–613 AD (Pinar et al., 1995), although ALHE has a much more recent history. Shavelson (2009) identified four distinct eras of assessment in higher education in the United States. The first era, from 1900-1933, was called the "origin of standardized tests." During these years, the first objective multiple-choice tests were devised and came into use for the evaluation of individual student learning and the value-added learning associated with attendance at specific institutions. Learned and Wood (1938) were among the first to make use of these multiple-choice tests to implement a large-scale evaluation of student learning across multiple higher education institutions in the late-1920s and early-1930s. The second era, 1933-1947, extended assessment to non-cognitive areas and saw the development of the Graduate Record Exam as a test for

entrance into graduate school. The third era, 1948-1978, was identified by Shavelson as the “era of the rise of the test providers,” whose services were in much demand to screen veterans eager to make use of their G.I. Bill funds to attend college. The fourth era, and the one that gave rise to ALHE as recognized today, from 1979-present, was described by Shavelson as the “era of external accountability.”

The most influential report during the era of external accountability was *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a landmark report on education that propelled interest in educational reform through accountability at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. Specifically, the report recommended “schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct” (p. 27). In the very next year, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984) converted these expectations into recommended practices, proposing “assessment as a means to provide information about the teaching and learning process and as feedback to help improve the effectiveness with which students, faculty, and the institution carry out their work” (p. 53). The Study Group also recommended “accrediting agencies should hold colleges, community colleges, and universities accountable for clear statements of expectations for student learning, appropriate assessment programs to determine whether those expectations are being met, and systematic efforts to improve learning as a result of those assessment” (p. 69). These recommendations—including both assessment as improvement and assessment as accountability—propelled numerous state mandates and substantial changes to accreditation (Ewell, 2007) such that by the mid-1990s nearly all accredited higher education institutions in the U.S. reported some type of engagement with assessment (El-Khawas, 1995). With institutions compelled to engage in assessment of learning, but lacking clear guidance on which assessment practices were effective, and lacking formal preparation programs for those who would lead this work, ALHE was born.

Progress and Current Indicators of ALHE as a Discipline

To understand the progress of ALHE developing as a discipline, I will return to the characteristics of a discipline described earlier. First, I will consider how ALHE addresses Trowler’s (2014) description of a discipline as “ways of knowing...behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses, and motivations” (p. 24). More well-established disciplines will tend to have more, although not complete, agreement on these items, while emerging disciplines will be in early stages of debating these fundamental issues. After that, I will examine ALHE using the more visible elements of a discipline as identified through the Library Science case summary. A summary of the progress of ALHE developing as a discipline and priority areas for future action is provided in Table 1.

Ways of knowing in a discipline are about much more than understanding the primary concepts in a discipline; rather it is about procedural knowledge (Carter, 2007) involving how those in the discipline know what they know. In ALHE, there is a consensus that evidence of student learning, as part of a cycle of inquiry that includes collecting and using that evidence, should be used to frame what is known (see, for example, Maki, 2004), although there remain significant debates over the level of rigor required for assessment data (Eubanks, 2017). This gap in agreement around ways of knowing leaves space for additional maturation of ALHE as a discipline.

Behavioral practices of ALHE, as it is situated inside higher education institutions, follows typical higher education administration practices including working with faculty, students, and staff members, implementing policies and procedures, and ensuring organizational effectiveness. These elements are not unique to ALHE and borrow heavily from higher education administration research and practices. Behavioral practices have been described in detail in many excellent assessment practice books, such as *Assessment Essentials* (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

Efforts to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline would benefit from learning from existing disciplines that have gone through this process

Table 1
Summary of progress in ALHE developing as a discipline and priority areas for future action.

Category	Progress	Priority for future action
Ways of knowing (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Behavioral practices (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Discourses (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Procedures (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Emotional responses and motivations (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Agreement on knowledge and abilities needed	Moderate to low	Yes-develop widely agreed-upon competency list
Formal preparation programs	Low	Yes-a need for more programs accessible to diverse students
Accreditation for preparation programs or professionals	None	Yes-no framework or known progress
Shared research agenda	Early stages	Yes-follow-through and sustain current progress
Dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research	Low	Yes-develop resources to support more dedicated journals of varying scope

Discourses are “wholly or partly made up of language use as part of wider social practices” (Bergstrom & Boreus, 2017, p. 6). ALHE has a well-developed language and there are numerous examples of ALHE dictionaries or glossaries. Examples of terms that are commonly used within ALHE that might be understood differently outside of ALHE include “student learning outcome statement,” “rubric,” “direct assessment of learning,” and “value added” (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, n.d.). Peter Ewell’s 2001 article, written for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, has been highly influential in not only defining key terminology—much of which remains in use today—but also in setting the policy framework accreditors use to determine their ALHE accreditation standards (Ewell, 2001). Specifically, Ewell (2001) identified three dimensions on which accreditors needed to make important ALHE policy decisions. The first was around the prescription of outcomes, which ran from complete institutional discretion on one end to complete dictation of outcomes by the accreditor on the other. The second dimension addressed the unit of analysis for ALHE, with individual competency attainment on one end and overall institutional effectiveness on the other. The third and final dimension described the focus of the accreditor’s review of ALHE, with a process-focused review on one end of the dimension to examination of direct evidence of student achievement on the other. In this way, Ewell’s (2001) paper identified important terminology and described the context in which that terminology should be used, thereby providing a structure for ALHE’s discourse.

The primary procedure used in ALHE is the assessment cycle, which includes the “systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4). While this process has been refined and modified since 1999, including the use of new technology tools and software platforms, the cycle of assessment and its associated closing of the assessment loop remain the primary procedures used in ALHE. The “Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning” report, published in 1992 by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), is regarded as a description of widely accepted practices for ALHE (Astin et al., 1992).

Emotional responses and motivations of ALHE are around ensuring and improving student learning in higher education. While there is no agreement in ALHE regarding

whether the current level of student learning in higher education is sufficiently high (see, for example, the numerous critiques of the 2011 book *Academically Adrift*, such as Lederman, 2013), there is broad agreement in ALHE that its primary motivation is to improve student learning by improving the effectiveness of students' experiences within higher education institutions. An excerpt from a foundational statement approved by the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education's (AALHE) membership in January of 2020 describes the motivation for assessment as:

The aim of student learning assessment and institutional effectiveness assessment is the ongoing enhancement of quality. AALHE supports these efforts in quality improvement by promoting assessment not just “of learning” but more importantly “for learning.” (Adanu et al., 2020)

Notably, this description of the aims of ALHE does not include external accountability as a motivator for assessment. (However, all efforts to improve include some type of implicit accountability, whether that be to our students, our disciplines, or even to ourselves.)

To summarize ALHE's fulfillment of Trowler's (2014) definition of a discipline, while ALHE can address many aspects, there remain significant disagreements and controversies around several important elements, such as the ways of knowing and what counts as sufficiently rigorous evidence. The reasons for these disagreements and controversies will become more apparent below, as the paper turns to the more visible outward indicators of a discipline pulled from the review of the Library Science's development as a discipline.

Agreement on the knowledge and abilities needed for those in the discipline. While there are some existing lists of competencies, knowledge, and skills for ALHE, such as those by the combined American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and NASPA project from 2015 on assessment in student affairs (ACPA College Student Educators International & NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015), or a competency framework proposed in 2021 by two authors from James Madison University (Horst & Prendergast, 2020), there is little evidence that such lists have influenced hiring practices of institutions seeking those with training in ALHE or the development of formal programs for preparing individuals in ALHE. This suggests a lack of practical agreement on the competencies, knowledge, and skills needed for those in ALHE. Reaching agreement on a set of knowledge and abilities needed for the discipline occurred early on for Library Science and should therefore be an area of emphasis for advancing ALHE.

Formal preparation programs for ALHE. While there exist a few formal preparation programs for ALHE, (e.g., James Madison University, Boston College, Walden University, and others), most practitioners of ALHE were prepared in non-ALHE fields. Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) indicated that ALHE practitioners were prepared in the fields of education (44%), social sciences (30%), natural sciences (12%), arts and humanities (7%), business (5%), and theology (1%), and they maintained a mix of degree levels including doctoral (63%), master's (35%), and bachelor's (2%) (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Other scholars noted the “chaotic” routes that many take on their way to becoming assessment professionals, highlighting the current importance of providing professional development opportunities aligned with assessment competencies for those who do not have opportunities for formal assessment preparation programs (Ariovich et al., 2018; Curtis et al., 2020). Expanding access to preparation programs developed around a common set of competencies remains a significant challenge for the establishment of ALHE as a discipline.

Accreditation for ALHE programs or ALHE professionals. Accreditation for programs and professionals is a means of ensuring those working in ALHE have acquired the requisite competencies, knowledge, and skills identified as important by the discipline. Although there are no formal accreditation programs for ALHE, there are numerous organizations that offer professional development outside of a formal academic program for those who are working in ALHE or would like to work in ALHE. Based on a quick web search, there are at least 10 regional higher education assessment organizations (University Assessment, 2021), at least one national higher education assessment organization that has been active for more

than a decade (Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, 2019), and numerous higher education assessment-related conferences such as the Assessment Institute at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and the Annual Conference of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (Zelna & Dunstan, 2012). Accreditation for ALHE preparation programs is important for ensuring a high level of quality in the practice of ALHE and is a powerful tool for providing quality assurance (Wergin, 2005) and should be thoughtfully considered as a critical strategy for growing recognition of ALHE as a discipline.

A shared, formal research agenda for ALHE. While prior to 2020 there was no sustained effort to explicitly define a research agenda for ALHE, some trends are noted. A review of the first ten years of scholarship published in *Research & Practice in Assessment* from 2007 to 2017 found early articles focused on methodological and psychometric concerns, while more recent publications have shifted attention to issues of improvement and the impact of college across an individual's lifespan (Anderson & Curtis, 2017). A presentation at the 2017 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education's annual conference noted trends in assessment presentations and articles around community engagement, eportfolios, faculty development, global learning, graduate/professional education, high impact practices, and student affairs programs and services (Black et al., 2017). The 2021 Assessment Institute conference covered an astounding 21 different tracks, including areas such as accreditation, general education, leadership, STEM, community colleges, use of technology, and institutional data collection (IUPUI, 2021). In recent years there has been a sustained push to identify a set of grand challenges that is hoped will drive funding and research progress in the future (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). However, it is not clear the extent to which these grand challenges will be embraced or whether they will drive research funding support for ALHE and result in an established research agenda for ALHE. Nevertheless, there remains a need for more high-quality, self-reflective research in ALHE that addresses issues of shared importance to ALHE and those who use its scholarship.

Areas where progress is needed are the development of more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies for ALHE professionals, accreditation of programs and professionals, a stronger research agenda, and dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research.

Ways to share scholarly work for ALHE. Disciplinary journals are important in the growth and development of a discipline since they “provide one window into the social, cognitive, and rhetorical dimensions of a disciplinary enterprise” (Goggin, 1997, p. 324). Currently the “window” provided by journals into ALHE might be best described as murky, as there are few dedicated journals of limited recognition. Even though many journals publish items related to ALHE, such as *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, there are few that are truly dedicated to ALHE, such as *Research and Practice in Assessment*, *PARE Online*, *Intersection*, and *Assessment Update*.

Overall, ALHE's status as a discipline is tenuous. Its strongest successes have been in the adoption of ALHE's procedures by higher education institutions, in the acceptance of the motivations driving the work of ALHE, and in the number and scale of regional and national professional organizations. Areas where progress is needed are the development of more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies for ALHE professionals, accreditation of programs and professionals, a stronger research agenda, and dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research.

The Importance of Establishing ALHE as a Discipline

There are several reasons why it is important to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline. First, without a strong national voice, there is an increased risk that decisions about ALHE will be made by external forces reflecting political whims or motivations. A discipline provides a professional identity (Taylor, 2008) and academic identity (Henkel, 2000) to the members of the discipline, providing empowerment and a shared voice on issues of importance. For example, one member of the influential Spelling's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) reported surprise at the lack of discussion about teaching and learning in the commission's deliberations on how to improve higher education.

My biggest surprise, however, was the near absence of insights about teaching and learning in either the materials presented to us or in the discussions within the commission. We talked a lot – at times seemingly endlessly – about testing what students knew and didn’t know. But we barely discussed at all how students learn and whether different learning approaches would yield better results. (Zemsky, 2007)

Establishing ALHE as a discipline would provide a shared professional identity, allowing members of the discipline to support each other and advance their success through advocacy for policies, effective practices, and external support for improving student learning.

In addition to protecting teaching and learning from external pressures, establishing ALHE as a discipline would provide a mechanism for ongoing self-critique and growth. One of the early goals of ALHE was to increase the number of institutions and degree programs that engaged in assessment. Recent surveys have indicated this goal is nearly completed, with a large majority of institutions reporting having statements of learning, using assessment for compliance and improvement, supporting faculty use of assessment, and a trend toward the use of authentic measures of student learning (Jankowski, et al., 2018), perhaps to the point of assessment becoming a routine practice. However, assessment becoming routine is also a risk as routine practices can become a case of doing the wrong thing repeatedly with more confidence. A discipline provides connections between scholars who study its practices and procedures with a critical lens and provides mechanisms to share the results from those investigations through dedicated journals and conferences (Becher, 1989).

Without establishing a strong discipline or professional identity, there is potential risk of promoting practices that do not have student learning and students’ success at the center. For example, in K-12 education, there is a long history of principals and teachers making intervention decisions without demanding rigorous evidence of effectiveness (Slavin, 2020). Although this has been changing with the creation of clearinghouses on reviews of effectiveness, such as *Evidence for ESSA* (www.evidencefoessa.org), this still leaves decision-makers open to influence from for-profit educational services providers who need to meet that quarter’s earnings goals. The educational services and technology industry is not an enemy to be feared; however, it needs to be held accountable, which requires thoughtful scholarly critique that is enhanced by a strong, independent discipline and professional organization. The unbiased scholarly study of effective practices in ALHE that becomes possible through a discipline helps to reduce the influence of external motives and keep focus on the needs of students and institutions.

A second tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is that it may increase inequities around the individuals who are able to gain access to the profession

A third reason it is important to advance ALHE as a discipline is to improve its ability to provide quality control for preparation programs and for the professionals who practice. A lack of quality control for ALHE increases the likelihood for assessment malpractice, leading to dissatisfaction with ALHE. For instance, Karin Brown complained in her 2021 article that learning goals for assessment “are handed down as edicts to be followed” (2021, para. 13). Yet, the widely accepted *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* specifically recommend against this practice, stating “assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved” (Astin et al., 1992). Brown’s institution may very well have included representatives from across the community in identifying learning goals without Brown’s knowledge, but that is not the point. The point of this example is to illustrate how ALHE can be subjected to intense criticism and even rejected entirely *even if institutional practices do not align with best practices in ALHE*. In addition to assessment malpractice disillusioning faculty, staff, and academic leaders, decreasing the likelihood that they will actively engage in assessment again in the future, assessment malpractice also risks damaging student learning, decreasing equity, and harming the very students ALHE seeks to support. Advancing ALHE as a discipline improves its ability to provide quality control and quality assurance by clearly communicating the competencies professionals need to be successful and by ensuring preparation programs are preparing effective professionals.

Tensions in Establishing ALHE as a Discipline

Efforts to establish ALHE as a discipline produces several tensions. First, disciplines can produce tunnel vision where “one becomes obsessed with a singular field,” which prevents the application of “problems, methods, ideas, and inspirations from other fields” (Nichols, 2012, p. 12). This presents a tension in establishing knowledge, skills, and abilities in ALHE preparation programs and professionals while allowing for diversity of disciplinary expertise and background to avoid ALHE becoming an echo-chamber of narrowly focused individuals.

A second tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is that it may increase inequities around the individuals who are able to gain access to the profession. In the United States, there are “deep, persistent disparities in higher education outcomes” by race, ethnicity, and income (Kazis, 2020, p. 129). Accreditation for ALHE programs would increase the cost of the programs and limit the number of institutions who would be willing to invest the resources needed to compete for students. This could result in a funnel-narrowing effect where students who already have difficulty accessing higher education could find it increasingly difficult to access a small number of higher-cost ALHE preparation programs. This tension could be addressed with resources dedicated to institutions that serve underrepresented students and low-income students, by reducing the overall cost of college (Kazis, 2020), and by offering programs in accessible formats, such as online or in the evenings or weekends.

A third tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is the perception of ALHE as trying to carve out improving student learning as its exclusive domain rather than recognizing student learning as a shared effort across many disciplines. Imagine a novice physician, when confronted with a disease she does not recognize, trying to blame her ignorance on her medical school’s lack of a fully developed assessment program instead of many other possible factors (e.g., her failure to attend a particular lesson, a gap in the curriculum as set forth by the program’s faculty, an error in a textbook, a gap in her clinical practice experience, or, yes, on assessment). This tension could be addressed by intentionally building collaborations, partnerships, and relationships between ALHE and other disciplines that have a similar desire to improve student learning and development.

Next Steps

ALHE has made tremendous progress in its development as a discipline from the early 1980s. Recognizing the tenuous nature of ALHE’s status as a discipline, along with the benefits and tensions in moving forward, it is instructive to return to the lessons from Library Science in determining next steps. Following is a discussion of potential next steps for establishing ALHE as a discipline (see Table 2 for a summary of these steps).

Communicate the Problems ALHE Can Solve

The first lesson from Library Science is to communicate a clear message about the important problems the discipline can solve. For Library Science, the problems they solved were around how to “ensure the preservation of such materials...and then delivering access to these materials” (Richardson, 2010, p. 2). Library Science then worked to identify the specific clerical and professional skills needed and worked to ensure their preparation programs developed these skills in their students.

For ALHE, the message about what important problem ALHE solves has not always been clearly communicated. For example, consider how Fendrich (2007) described assessment:

Outcomes-assessment practices in higher education are grotesque, unintentional parodies of both social science and ‘accountability.’ No matter how much they purport to be about ‘standards’ or student ‘needs,’ they are in fact scams run by bloodless bureaucrats who, steeped in jargon like ‘mapping learning goals’ and ‘closing the loop,’ do not understand the holistic nature of a good college education. (para 1)

Beyond simply disagreeing with ALHE, Fendrich seems to not understand the problems ALHE attempts to solve, which are: how to collect high quality evidence of student learning and how to use that evidence to ensure and improve quality.

Table 2
Next Steps for Advancing ALHE as a discipline.

Next Step	Who needs to be involved	Important considerations
Communicate the problems ALHE can solve	All ALHE practitioners	Develop agreement on what problems ALHE solves
Advance ALHE as a discipline with intentionality	Professional organizations	Requires resources such as volunteers and money
Sustain efforts for the long term	All ALHE practitioners	All for one, one for all

Beyond simply disagreeing with ALHE, Fendrich seems not to understand the problems ALHE attempts to solve, which are: how to collect high quality evidence of student learning and how to use that evidence to ensure and improve quality.

Having clarity about the problems ALHE solves will point to what preparation is needed for those who work in ALHE. In a decision that should be copied by ALHE, Library Science decided to offer training in Library Science at different levels to meet different needs. In ALHE, this suggests separating more administrative or clerical assessment tasks, such as collecting reports, operating software tools, or checking on assessment status, from more assessment leadership-related responsibilities, such as developing philosophical and theoretical approaches for an institution’s assessment activities, collaborating with faculty and administrators, ensuring the rigor of assessment evidence, and ensuring and improving learning and development.

All ALHE practitioners must take on the work of this first task by updating websites, changing business cards, and changing the way we talk about our work to include ensuring and improving student learning. If we do not agree that these are the important problems that ALHE solves, then we had better get busy discussing our disagreements and seeking common ground on the problems ALHE seeks to solve that will benefit our institutions, our students, and our communities.

Advance ALHE as a Discipline with Intentionality

The second lesson from Library Science is to be intentional and strategically target energy and efforts toward initiatives that advance ALHE as a discipline. The areas identified as gaps in this paper—more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies, knowledge, and skills, accreditation of programs and professionals, and a stronger research agenda with places to share that research—all require resources and dedicated development effort. These initiatives are likely best led by a professional organization given their complexity. The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) is currently the largest and most well-resourced professional association for ALHE practitioners, but success in this area will require collaboration and cooperation across many organizations and institutions at a scale not yet achieved.

Sustain Efforts for the Long Term

The third lesson from Library Science is to recognize that it is a long-term play—a marathon, not a sprint—and it will take additional decades to fully establish ALHE as a discipline. It is notable that Library Science continues to evolve today and, according to some, Library Science “has still not reached the maturity of other disciplines” (Stielow, 1994). ALHE is about 100 years behind Library Science and a long-term play suggests several decades of concentrated effort remain for ALHE to fully develop as a discipline. All ALHE practitioners must find ways to sustain these efforts for the long term and take an all for one, one for all approach to this important work.

Hope for the Future

Even though ALHE has made considerable progress in developing as a discipline and the lessons from this paper provide guidance on how to continue and accelerate that

All ALHE practitioners must find ways to sustain these efforts for the long term and take an all for one, one for all approach to this important work.

progress, some more cynical scholars might despair from the belief that ALHE will never be as well developed as a discipline as we may desire. In times when despair seems to overwhelm, it can be reassuring to look at another scholarly domain that finds itself in a similar situation. Tourism is a domain that some have suggested will never be a discipline because of its “pluralistic nature and lack of a cohesive theoretical framework” (Krause, 2012, p. 189), despite the efforts of numerous scholars to resolve methodological issues in the study of tourism (Butowski, 2011). But even if tourism remains an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary area of study, there will always be tourists, people who serve tourists, and people who are interested in understanding the phenomenon of tourism. In the same way, those who care about the advancement of ALHE may rest soundly knowing that the cause they have championed and continue to champion—to put student learning at the forefront of practice in higher education with a focus on evidence of student learning—has taken strong root in academia and will continue to grow long into the future even if ALHE fades into the background of disciplinarity.

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